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## Recognizing Young People's Civic Engagement Practices: Re-Thinking Literacy Ontologies through Co-Production

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**ABSTRACT** *In this article I argue that it is important to find a language to describe youth engagement practices in informal settings. I argue that many young people do not have the resources to be heard on visible platforms, but their work, and meaning making practices might provide important information about their ideas and relay key concepts about how communicational practices are constructed. Drawing on embedded, ethnographic and artistically informed projects with young people in communities, I argue for a deeper kind of listening. Artistic forms such as poetry, visual art, dance and music are important modes of engagement. I draw on cultural practice theory together with theory from new literacy studies and media studies to explore four questions:*

- *How do you craft what you know?*
- *How do you speak/make what you feel?*
- *How do you transform practice?*
- *How do you articulate action?*

*I see these as components of the process of producing relationally oriented modes of address that others can also engage with. Taken together, they suggest a language of description for the mode that is civic engagement communicational practice, that is, oriented beyond individual experience but drawing from experience to make change happen in relational ways.*

**KEYWORDS** literacy; media; youth; civic engagement; participation; informal and community

### Introduction

Currently in the UK very high levels of youth mental illness and suicide are being recorded. Responding adequately to the world's challenges is not easy, when climate change, disturbing moves to the far right and a rise in racist discourses are creating difficult and often threatening conditions for life. The

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impact of conservative austerity politics in the UK and increased pressure on resources around the world adds to this difficulty. Within this mix, young people's accounts of their lived experience remain muted and world leaders seem distant from their experiences. The idea of participating in "conventional" forms of civic engagement, that is, the youth parliament, youth assemblies or local governance structures, therefore might be very difficult for some young people. However, many young people can participate on their terms. These participatory processes can draw on expressive forms to make statements about the world and their place within it. These processes engage with something that Hickey-Moody (2013) identifies as "little publics," that is, "spaces in which young people are heard" (p. 22). This involves a focus on materiality and the modes of engagement that young people employ to make meaning (Rowse, 2013).

In this article, I link together the idea of "little publics" and the different modalities of communicational practice available to young people to the ideas put forward by Ellsworth (2005), who described the idea of the "pedagogical address," that is, a public event which can touch and surface in the outside world in a relational way (p. 48). I propose that there needs to be an expansive account of the communicative practices of civic engagement that takes in the following questions:

- How do you craft what you know?
- How do you speak/make what you feel?
- How do you transform practice?
- How do you articulate action?

Crafting, speaking, making, transforming and articulating are all part of the process of producing relationally oriented modes of address that others can also engage with. Taken together, they suggest a language of description for the mode that is civic engagement communicational practice; that is, oriented beyond individual experience but drawing from wider experience to make change happen in relational ways.

One of the challenges for young people is getting their voices heard, particularly within less affluent communities. This challenge also involves a process of recognition of young people's voices. It means being attuned to the ways in which their communicational practices are layered and complex. I argue here that it is important to explore the potential of expanding what could be understood to be literacy when considering young people's communicational practices. Rather than see literacy as static, and connected to specific writing and reading practices, I ascribe to it a "what if" quality that sees literacy as expansive and located in the realm of the "not yet" (Daniel & Moylan, 1997). A wider and more expansive concept of literacy enables researchers to recognize young people's civic engagement practices more fully.

Research on the representational practices of youth cultures has focused on the dynamic, multimodal and transnational nature of such literacies (Potter & McDougall, 2017; Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017; Wissman, Staples,

Vasudevan, & Nichols, 2015). These literacies are material as well as (im)material and emerge in complex, layered ways (Pahl, 2014). Research on the literacies of youth civic engagement has tended to focus on digital youth media practices and multimodal and visual communicational practices as a mode of engagement (Hauge & Bryson, 2014; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sahni, 2010). Particular traditions within literacy studies, such as critical literacy, describe the means by which young people can become empowered to change their surroundings in practical and effective ways (Morrell, 2017). Shaping experience and co-creating “stuff” can happen through creative interruptions as well as within the everyday (Nelson, Hull, & Young, 2013). Many studies have acknowledged the rhetorics of youth public engagement to be a complex process of re-mixing and re-assembling semiotic artifacts across sites and spaces (Stornaiuolo & Jung, 2017). This connective energy can create new forms and new semiotic assemblages in the processes of making and re-making.

I focus on moments of *recognition* of youth engagement practices. To do this, I have drawn on process-oriented theory, such as the work of Massumi (2011), which looks more closely at what “becoming” can be. I consider how co-production, as a model of research that is concerned with researching “with” people, rather than “on” participants, can facilitate understandings of young people’s civic engagement and cultural participation. This can enable a process of re-thinking ontologies of communication for a more nuanced recognition of youth civic engagement practices. Cultures seep into literacy and work through literacy practices (Street, 1993). Culture is the starting point for civic participation, and young people have very varied styles and modes of participation, often located in particular sites and spaces. Batsleer et al. (2017) argue that it is important to recognize where these informal spaces operate and how they are made open for interactive exchanges where young people can become active: “there is an attunement to everyday practices and sharing of resources, pleasures and leisure time which create the channels for further connection and exchange” (p. 51).

These micro-political spaces might be cultural and social, and could include informal gatherings, and activities such as dance, film-making and creative craft. Grounding this work in young people’s lives and practices is crucial for these cultural processes of engagement to become effective (Hauge & Bryson, 2014). Recognizing these practices as “being in the moment,” and understanding that in-moment experience expansively, is critical for understanding them (Massumi, 2015). It is important to attune to young people’s in the moment ways of knowing and being.

Civic engagement has commonly been used to describe people’s relationship to everyday civic society. However, although the idea encompasses ordinary people’s relationship to their lived environment, young people’s lived experiences are not always expressed outside their own worlds. Forms of expression such as marches, petitions, letters and online forums can be difficult to access. Many young people live difficult everyday

lives, burdened by poverty, austerity policies and anti-immigration sentiments. In recognition of these issues, Jenson, Dahya and Fisher (2014) caution against an over-zealous adherence in youth engagement research to focusing on “new” forms of media production, and instead acknowledge the multiple ways in which young people experience the world. Many households cannot afford Wifi or broadband internet access, meaning that digital engagement is inaccessible at home. Schools also tend to have heavily restricted internet access. Carer responsibility and food poverty limit youth’s resources to spend on digital composing practices. The diverse and complex nature of youth’s lived experience problematizes the idea of “youth voice” in marginalized contexts (Dahya, 2017). Young people lead complex, layered lives, within scripts that can be unreadable to those outside their experience. Iverson et al. (2018) describing work on poverty and exclusion using arts methodologies with young people in Manchester, write:

We heard from young people and children, while preparing for the community forum, who were so distressed by the homeless people sitting on the streets that they made time to go and feed them, to give them their breakfast. As we worked with them drawing, mapping and creating poems, these same young people began to express their level of their frustration with a school curriculum that gives them no useful knowledge, such as how to budget, get a job and how to buy a house. They fear that they too will end up on the street. (p. 140)

This work acknowledges both how young people are themselves disadvantaged, but also how their experience of taught programmes are not necessarily congruent with the compassion and empathy they are developing in everyday life. Only by acknowledging the common cultures of young people’s lived experience do some of the levers of creative involvement in civic engagement practices emerge. The idea of civic engagement presupposes a mode of engaging which might be almost impossible given the scale of difficulties young people face. As Bright (2016) notes of his own experience in the UK coalfields,

Remarkably, every single young person that I had spent time with between 2006 and 2011 – around a hundred or so – was familiar, as a matter of course, with some combination of more than two or three of the following: family breakdown, long-term unemployment, chronic disease, disability, alcoholism, sexual abuse (including rape), drug use and overdose related death, arrest and strip search, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, custodial sentences, curfew orders, parental imprisonment, suicide, accidental death, eviction and domestic violence. They were, in short, a highly precarious group by any general definition of the term. (p. 44)

It is in that context that I situate my thinking in this article. Below, I provide an account of the specific contexts for my research, Rotherham, UK, and the work that I have been doing in developing small scale projects with young people that focus on the cultural context of civic engagement.

### Researching Civic Engagement Practices with Young People

Here, I introduce the work I have been doing with young people that has surfaced some of the issues raised above. With my colleagues we have been developing small-scale, collaborative, artistically informed projects with young people in informal and formal education contexts over many years in one small town, Rotherham, in the UK. The work has been collaborative, with community partners on the ground and with artists, poets and youth workers (see Campbell, Pahl, Pente, & Rasool, 2018). We have been informed by the idea of cultures as “ordinary” drawing on an appreciation of the collective ways in which cultures are felt and expressed (Pahl, 2014; Williams, 2005). Researching collaboratively with students, practitioners, artists and researchers, together with university faculty can become a process of civic engagement in which “living knowledge” is co-created together (Facer & Enright, 2016). Some of this work was enabled by an ESRC funded research project called “Imagine.” The Imagine project was a five-year research project that looked at the social, historical, cultural and democratic context of civic engagement. The focus was on imagining different communities and making them happen.<sup>1</sup>

The research we did was enabled through co-production methodologies that were constructed from the ground, lived and decided upon in relation to community expertise and decision-making processes (Banks, Hart, Pahl, & Ward, 2019). Co-production involves re-centering children and young people’s expertise not just in relation to what they know but also in relation to what *could be known*. It is hopeful practice (Pahl & Pool, 2018). This stance recognizes that children are not just “becoming” but are themselves, “being” within the here and now (Uprichard, 2008). Children’s perception of their place in the world can provide new ways of understanding and knowing (Pahl & Pool, 2011). Co-production with children and young people is a relational mode of doing research. This recognizes that academic knowledge is not necessarily the way forward in understanding youth participation and involvement. Instead it recognizes how lived experience nuances and inflects understandings of communication. This then demands a complex form of listening (Back, 2007). The process of co-creating living knowledge with children and young people involves considering both aesthetic and political dimensions to make sense of young people’s lived experiences (Hull & Nelson, 2009).

If we are to take children and young people’s civic engagement practices seriously, we need to be attentive to their ways of knowing about those practices. This might involve de-centering disciplinary knowledge about how language works, how literacy works and what is salient within those practices. It might mean paying close attention to the sites where these practices are generated (Batsleer et al., 2017). The sites can become places

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<sup>1</sup> ESRC Grant number: ESK/002686-2.

for meaning making, and through creating new “living knowledge” can generate theory about the practice (Facer & Enright, 2016). Focusing on the sites and spaces where children and young people make meaning enables researchers to listen more closely to the messages within their multimodal productions. In our projects, we worked in fine-grained ways, in small-scale research teams with children and young people, drawing on artistic modes of inquiry including poetry and visual art, in order to develop an understanding of what young people’s visions of the future could be, but also, what they think arts practices can offer them. This work took a relational, emotionally attuned and place-based approach to research. This approach engages with work by Ehret (2018) who explored the emergent and yet-to-be quality of affective interactions, and considered ways in which the literacies of emergence and possibility can inform this thinking. In order to think about the spatialities of civic engagement, I engage with work by Kinloch (2010) who describes, with young people, their experiences of growing up in a neighborhood that was rapidly gentrifying, as well as Comber (2016) who worked with teachers to co-create pedagogies of place. These authors helped us re-think the practices of belonging as a critical process. In this article I reflect on these processes and practices in order to re-think youth civic participation in everyday spaces.

### **The New Literacy Studies as an Agent of Change**

I begin by considering the “modes of address” (Ellsworth 2005) of young people, and in particular, I hone in on the everyday literacy practices that are marshalled for civic engagement. The New Literacy Studies developed an understanding that everyday forms of literacy are as significant as literacy practices that are identified with schooling (Street, 1993). When we think about the New Literacy Studies, a trajectory comes to mind of a movement that is concerned with documenting everyday literacy practices, exploring and unpicking the threads across sites, spaces and within and between the everyday and lived experience and pedagogic contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Nirantar Collective, 2007; Street, 1993). Studies from this tradition have emphasized the importance of anthropological perspectives that draw on local and situated perspectives of what literacy is and could be. These perspectives are valued in their own right for what they tell us about the nature of literacy as it is lived across sites and spaces.

Together, using co-produced research with families in a multi-lingual town in the UK a group of researchers including myself and community researcher Zanib Rasool, collaboratively documented everyday literacy practices, in a project resulting in an edited book (Campbell et al., 2018). We developed our ideas together, through co-production and co-writing (Rasool 2017). These literacy practices included craft and materially oriented work as well as small moments of inscription, such as nail art and everyday talismans embedded in

tattoos and within inscribed practices (Pahl, 2014). This research then re-situated and re-defined what could be understood to be literacy practices. Here, I expand on this in more detail, beginning with a discussion of the timescales of literacy practices.

Time has an expansive quality in young people's lives, as they both live in the moment, and then expand and contract the timescales of their lives in their textual productions (Compton-Lilly, 2010). This fluidity can be captured across the timescales of young people's lives – I have observed how youth have recorded their younger literacy selves, including their bedtime literacies (Pahl & Khan, 2015). In these studies, youth have documented their early writing, described memories of grandparents telling them oral stories, and explained how literacy feels. I have also noted a focus on the future, recognizing the ways in which young people feel pressured to write and spell correctly as a pathway to an uncertain job market and are anxious about money (Pahl, 2012). This forward-thinking view of literacy can also be grounded in a vision of what “could be,” a hopeful approach to literacy and language. This vision can become a way forward and a driver for transformation.

Space has worked as an agent of change in our studies. Sites and spaces can generate new forms of literacy (Comber, 2016). In my joint work with artist Steve Pool in an adventure playground, we have observed the ways in which play can support a form of forward dreaming, enabling a re-visioning of what “could be” to happen (Pahl & Pool, 2018). An attention to material objects has led to enhanced understandings of communicative practices. Literacies are entangled with material objects, and the ways in which meanings emerge can be co-created across a landscape of objects, gesture, oral stories and written texts (Pahl, 2014).

The principle of identifying everyday literacy practices involves a shared vision. Working with young people to identify youth literacies has opened up a space to debate what literacy is. In our work with young people, Steve Pool and I supported young people to script messages to government within films as well as use dance and film as a form of meaning making (Pool & Pahl, 2015). In our research projects we have also asked young people to make films about language and literacy. Making a film about a world without language opened up the possibility of material objects as agents within a communicational ensemble (Escott & Pahl, 2017). From this work we have begun to re-theorise civic engagement by re-defining literacy practices to become understood as expansive, fluid and speculative in nature.

### **Re-Theorizing Civic Engagement through Artistic Methodologies**

Civic engagement can be understood as a set of communicative practices that orient towards social change. In order to think about the processes involved in representing ideas and engaging with change, I return to these questions:



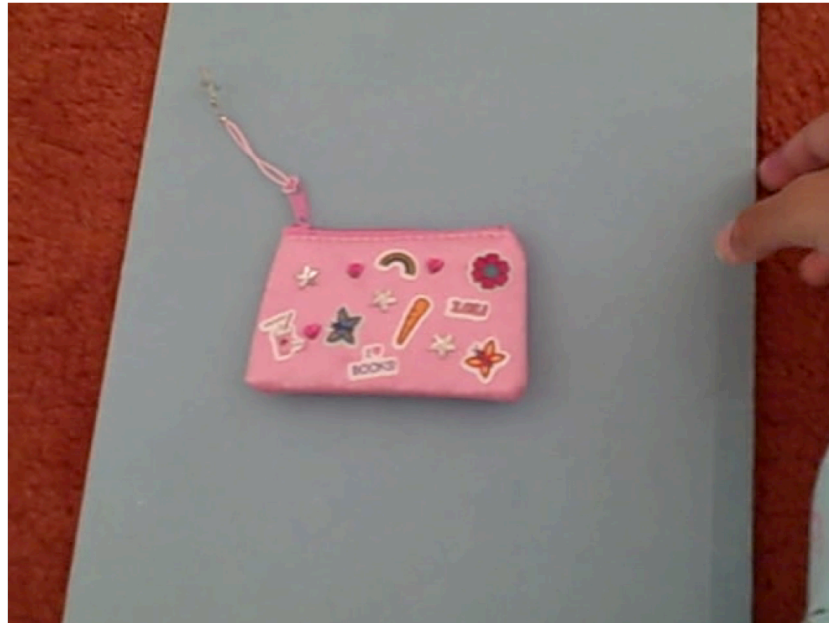
- How do you craft what you know?
- How do you speak/make what you feel?
- How do you transform practice?
- How do you articulate action?

These questions break down the representational practices that inform civic engagement into component parts that articulate what it is to make meaning in the moment. I begin with the concept of *craft* as a touchstone term for describing the mix of making and composing that many young people engage with as they work to describe their world. *Feeling* is part of a wider landscape of affect that itself lies behind the activity of civic engagement. From this process comes the impetus to *build practice* in order to articulate *action*. I call these stages the *waymarks* of civic engagement, and here present them in conversation with work by young people, which articulates these processes and practices.

*How do you craft what you know?*

Knowledge is felt, embodied, storied (Ingold, 2013). Young people gain their knowledge from lived experience, situated and inflected by common cultures (Willis, 2000). This knowledge is crafted and made through processes that are often situated in the home.

As part of a longitudinal study of one family's literacy practices over time (see Pahl & Khan, 2015), I focused on one British Asian girl, who was aged 10 when the study started. Her pseudonym was Lucy and she lived in a small terraced house in the town of Rotherham. She belonged to a close-knit community of families, who migrated from Pakistan to the UK in the 1950's and 1960's to work in the steel mills in the North of England. Lucy's father worked in a factory and her mother was at home with her baby sister. I asked Lucy to record and document her home literacy practices and gave her a small digital moving image camera to do so. After a few weeks, Lucy presented several small films to me. Her literacies were embedded within her craft activities. She worked to make things, but within the things were words, and these were entwined with her feelings about the world. The relational nature of literacy comes to the fore in Lucy's videos – what she feels becomes what she knows and vice versa. This reminds us of a “feeling-thinking” view of literacy that emerges through relations and experience (Ehret, 2018). Here are the words to Lucy's video of the purse (see Figure 1):



*Figure 1. Lucy's purse.*

Lucy: Here, I have made a purse  
And I can put my money and cards in it  
And I have put lots of stickers  
And three D stickers as well on  
And I have put all my favourite things on this side  
And I have put some things I hate and some things I like on this side  
I have got little gems and stars  
And little animals and food on  
And little signs that say keep out top secret  
(audio from film 4<sup>th</sup> August 2010)

Lucy's purse is a literacy artifact in that it holds writing. The writing reflects her pre-occupations with having privacy. The family at that time included herself, a sister who was younger by two years, and a baby sister as well as her two parents. The declamatory oral account of the text conforms to an "and... and... and" style which is both structured and expansive. Locating the purse within a tradition and heritage of craft was enabled through an email from Lucy's aunt, herself a community activist and poet. She wrote to me regarding the family's literacy activities and the link to craft:

The textile side of our heritage comes from the women in the family. We have older relatives that do appliqué, crochet, embroidery, sewing and knitting. (from the girl's mother's side their grandmother's sister and cousin and from their father side his two cousins who live close by). My younger sister Halima loves craft

type of activities and buys the girls a lot of resources to do sewing and fabric work especially on birthdays, Christmas and Eid. (Written text from the girls' aunt, email, August 2010)

The entwining of craft with writing is felt across generations and described in terms of cultural resources that move across and within families. This form of entwined literacies that reside in families is commonly understood as oral and storied as well as literate (Finnegan, 2007). Learning to craft what you know is not a pedagogy that was particularly visible within school. In our joint research projects, we found that practices such as fishing and music making were akin to craft as a form. It has become more visible recently through the maker movement (Kafai, Fields, & Searle, 2014). Being able to craft what you know can enable young people to make meaning differently. They might articulate messages that are not possible within traditional curricula.

*How do you speak/make what you feel?*

I now explore some processes by which young people begin to make sense of themselves and their futures. Poetry has been helpful in our projects in offering a medium for young people to make meaning that sits somewhat at a “slant” to conventional modes and media. As an illustration, I describe a small-scale project involving poetry writing with a group of young British Asian heritage girls. Hafsah's poem below has a startling quality of immediacy. Her poem was written one sunny Saturday in a park in Rotherham. Zanib Rasool, community researcher, together with poet Helen Mort, was working with a group of British Asian girls to write poetry. As one participant, Hafsah, looked at a lily lying beside a bandstand, she wrote this poem:

Lily

I was yanked away from my family and friends  
My petals were pulled painfully away from me  
I have now been left in the dark to be stood on repeatedly

The poem, written on a sunny Saturday in Rotherham, holds a quality that Gordon (1997) has called “social haunting,” which evokes sadness and loss. As in many other post-industrial towns, many inhabitants of Rotherham lost their livelihoods after an extensive period of de-industrialisation begun by the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Bright, 2016). More recently, a report on a child sexual exploitation case in the town highlighted that ordinary people's issues, – especially girls' and women's – were not being heeded (Jay, 2014). In my work in Rotherham, young people often alluded to hauntings, and a sense of loss and a fear of not being believed (Pahl, 2014). Bringing these together, Hafsah's words and the experiences in the town, the image of the crushed lily resonated for us as a team.

Much of our work in Rotherham was mediated by youth workers who worked alongside young people to support them to articulate feelings of invisibility and powerlessness. One of our projects involved working with a group of young people on a social housing estate in Rotherham to explore their experiences of civic engagement and participation. The project was called “Making Meaning Differently” and involved exploring the ways in which young people felt close to or disengaged from governance processes.<sup>2</sup> The youth worker, myself, and artist Steve Pool sat with a group of about 12 young people to talk about their feelings. Many of them agreed they didn’t have anywhere to meet up together. They also talked of not feeling safe. It was hard to get support from the local police; they talked of being threatened at knife-point, at one point, and calling for the police to come, but no one came. One of their chief complaints was not being listened to (see Figure 2 for a visual articulation of this frustration). The young people had co-produced a play about not being heard by the police, which was made into a film, and the artist, Steve Pool asked that they script messages over the film. At the same time, some of the girls danced to a message, “Stamp on the ground,” a popular song at the time. Steve made the film that incorporated the dance together with the message in Figure 2, which articulates their feelings:

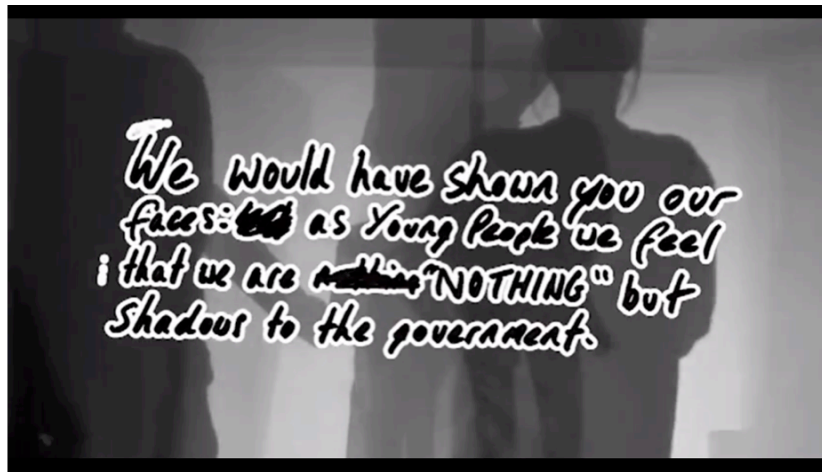


Figure 2. Shadow dance.

The artist, Steve, together with the young people, was able to bring together the dance, the slogan and the script in one complex story. A dance that was habitually done by the girls, to the tune of “Stamp on the Ground” by the Italo Brothers, enacted the feelings of the girls, both powerful and

<sup>2</sup> The “Making Meaning Differently” project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The project team included Hugh Escott, Jane Hodson, Kate Pahl, Steve Pool, and Richard Steadman-Jones.

powerless, within their communities. The young people told stories, played music, and enacted the experiences they had as a group, through a variety of artistic methods that captured their felt experiences. Speaking and making what they felt, involved layered modes of telling and relating stories and feelings, linked to habitual modes (the dance, the story) that were located within the everyday. Speaking and making what you feel is a process of layered complexity, and being inside that experience is as important as reaching outside to others. One of the complexities of the idea of young people's civic engagement is its interiority – Lucy's private purse is a message, but one that is mediated in very tiny ways with the outside world. Small-scale connections in these examples are built slowly, and declamatory work is less visible within this kind of practice. Some of the practices, the dance for example, were not so much messages to the outside, but expressions of feeling. In this way, complex ideas were caught and held within a wider process of meaning making in an assemblage (Ivinson & Renold, 2016).

#### *How do you build practice?*

Arts methodologies can provide a starting point for thinking differently about modes of engagement for civic participation. Building practices of civic engagement might instead mean going against the grain, refusing to engage with the “sensible” and engaging instead with radical and aestheticized practices (Ranciere, 2010). McDonnell (2018) argues that the arts can provide a space for collective decision-making that can also bring diverse and even opposing voices into one space. The example below explores this idea in more detail.

In an AHRC funded project called “Taking Yourself Seriously” a group of young people in a high school in Rotherham, UK, explored the impact of artistic methodologies on social cohesion in their school.<sup>3</sup> The team worked collaboratively to explore a range of arts methodologies, including poetry, music, and visual art. The project team consisted of poets Helen Mort and Andrew McMillan, musician John Ball, artist Zahir Rafiq, community worker Vicki Ward, and Kate Pahl. A small group of young people worked as a research team with Vicky Ward to explore the ways in which the arts and social cohesion were connected. Their findings identified the ways in which artistic forms such as music supported connective spaces of participation and belonging. Within the music rooms, the youth-led research team found these connective spaces. Young people drew on existing musical heritages to enact

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<sup>3</sup> The “Taking Yourself Seriously” project was an AHRC funded follow on project that explored the relationship between social cohesion and arts methodologies. Grant number: AH/P009573/1.

practices of belonging. Many of the young people, for example, drew on a strongly musical culture from Eastern Europe. Musician John Ball encouraged them to hear the beat of the drum and in the potential space of listening to each other's beat the students were able to co-create a space of cohesion together. The research team of young people made a collage about their findings, shown in Figure 3. The collage shows the keys of the piano together with a plasticene circle, in which the expression, "our musical community brings us together," is written.



*Figure 3. Our musical community brings us together.*

Building practice was about the practice of music and the doing that music involves. Being together, being with each other, was also embedded in a social practice. Over time, this became hopeful and embedded in stories of cohesion.

#### *How do you articulate action?*

In the projects I describe above, young people expressed themselves through situated craft activity (the purse), through poetry ("Lily"), through film, dance and slogans (Stamp on the Ground) and through music and the beat of the drum. These forms could be described as threads that stretch across from one space to another and can reach audiences outside the original contexts.

They are vehicles for ideas to be heard. Ellsworth (2005) has described these as “modes of pedagogical address.” Modes of address, according to Ellsworth (2005) are invisible pedagogical relationships that stretch across a young people and the space in which learning is taking place, whether this is a museum, art gallery, or school. If all the examples above – the purse, the poem, the scripted film and the musical community collage – are seen as pedagogical modes of address, their propositional quality, their seriousness, becomes highlighted. I argue that “modes of address” as a term needs to stretch to take account of young people’s everyday modes of address. Trafletti (2015) argues that these modes can include moments of conflict, and shock, as the process of coming-to-know is rendered uncomfortable. One of the elements I have identified in the work with young people in Rotherham is the idea of “uncomfortable literacies” – literacies that challenge the reader, and render the reader unsettled in the process of reading. Some of the examples here stray into those uncomfortable spaces.

Our work has developed a way of working that includes artistic methodologies that are tacit, embodied and felt (Coessens, Crispin, & Douglas, 2009; Ravetz & Ravetz, 2016). Artistic methodologies probe the surface of things, and listen to embodied, visual and oral responses. The arts encourage divergence and openness, as well as mess, uncertainty and unknowing, all vital tools in literacy research (Facer & Pahl, 2017; Vasudevan, 2011). Working with media, craft and making in forms such as film, poetry and visual art can then produce a new lens – young people’s own conceptual frameworks for what literacy and language could be. This is the language of possibility. Re-thinking modes of engagement means re-considering both the ontological perceptions of young people as well as drawing on their cultural interventions in order to support a form of utopian dreaming, a “what if” mode of address located in forward thinking (Bloch, 1986). This relies on a feeling/knowing mode that lets in process and things coming into being as they evolve (Massumi, 2011). One way to let in new knowledge production structures is through co-production to enable these reasonings to happen. These new reflections can disturb disciplinary knowledge production structures. They disrupt understandings of what we know and how we know. Below, I reflect on the potential of co-production to open up new understandings of civic engagement with young people.

### **Re-Thinking Literacy Ontologies for Youth Civic Engagement**

My argument here is that as researchers we might need to adjust and shift our ways of seeing as we listen to and view youth participatory practices. Sometimes the shaped nature of these practices can elude us, and their forms can feel unfamiliar. This might require new practices of research and recognition to make the familiar strange again. Re-thinking participatory structures drawing on Massumi’s (2011) concept of the event enables us to

understand the process of the literacy event in its almost-coming-into-beingness, and also offers an opportunity to work with young people as they compose, and then to question with them what a literacy event could look like.

Part of the challenge is that our research mechanisms cannot easily account for the layers of experience that make up young people's civic engagement practices. We are unequal to the task. The interventions described above were part of a stream of events that produced them and then have been framed here as something that speaks to wider concerns and feelings. One of the difficulties here is the separation of the concept of "civic engagement" from the idea of "cultural participation." Cultural stuff can be found within oral and relational cultures of participation (Boggs, Duarte, & Manglitz, 2017). In everyday life lie cultures of participation and these everyday forms offer structures of knowing we can learn from.

This brings me to the more open notion of the event as a mode of becoming, of "thinking-feeling" that can also include a process model of knowing (Massumi, 2011). Getting closer to the processual nature of young people's communicative practices, for example, to the purse, the lily, or the dance, highlights the "ordinary affects" that haunt these pieces of meaning making (Stewart, 2007). The signs that say "keep out," the feeling of being stood on repeatedly, the dance to "Stamp on the Ground," and the beat of the drum, all evoke affect. Hauge and Bryson (2014) challenged us to think about the ways in which young people's capacity for engagement can be strengthened. I argue here that understanding the conditions for that capacity, the dance, the purse, the lily and its context, require dense, granulated research with – not on – young people, to explore how they see the world. Part of what is wonderful about the purse, the "Stamp on the Ground" music, and the "Lily" is that they are about desire, passion, anger, and affect lies behind all of these, the affect of the moment (Massumi, 2015).

In a co-produced book which re-imagined the town of Rotherham, where the research took place, my co-authors and I tried to create a new social imaginary based on our shared writing (Campbell et al., 2018). One of our concerns was that this community did not need another description of its troubles:

While Rotherham's media image continues to concern many people, in everyday life people walk their dogs, exchange greetings with their neighbours, carry out litter picks and send their children to schools that work hard to support young people's aspirations and well-being. It is important to consider who is defining the story and how the story is told. We can provide accounts of post-industrial devastation, or we can listen to children and young people define their worlds themselves, page telling stories that might contain elements of hope, resistance, beauty, rebellion or contemplation. (Pahl & Crompton, 2018, p. 26)

One important aspect of civic engagement is to consider whose story is told and who does the telling. Tuck (2010), exploring the limits of Deleuze's



theory, pushes back against such negative images of communities in poverty, as follows:

A desire-based research framework recognizes and actively seeks out complexity in lives and communities. It dismisses one-dimensional analyses of people, communities, and tribes as flattened, derelict, and ruined. (pp. 638-639)

Co-production, as a methodology, opens up an invitation to become differently. It is a desiring methodology. The process of literacy desiring is expansive, it leads us somewhere else (Kuby & Rucker Gutshall, 2016). We have dreamed up projects in front rooms of houses, in parks, and with teachers and youth workers. Together, we have co-designed what we do, and explored the advantages of oral history, film, interviews and art as method. We have worked to co-write books and articles so that the voices in the written work do not reflect just one view, or draw on one theory (e.g., Campbell et al., 2018). This has all taken time, and is hard to do. However, we have begun to re-think what literacy and language could be. In my joint work with Hugh Escott (Escott & Pahl, 2017) we have begun to notice how young people's frameworks for understanding communicative practices are wider than ours and let in more things – material things as well as multimodal things. Returning to the idea of civic engagement, we ask the question, “what if?” “What if” civic engagement were differently conceptualized? How would that make things different?

## **Conclusion**

Thinking about the words “civic engagement” elicits a complex set of responses – civic activism can include demonstrations and creative interruptions, or more sanctioned modes of engaging such as in youth assemblies and youth councils. However, not all young people take part in demonstrations or belong to youth councils. Getting closer to young people's experience requires listening methodologies (Back, 2007). These can include collaborative ethnography (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Lassiter, 2005) or arts methods that come close to what young people do and say, taking in diversity, mess and complexity along the way (Facer & Pahl, 2017). Part of the challenge, however, lies in the language used by researchers to describe communicative practices. If literacy was closer to the lived experiences of young people, what would it look like? A participatory conceptual framework for literacy could include histories of participation as well as a wide spectrum of practices including material and symbolic forms (Willis, 2000). These let in more ways of knowing and expand a framework for what is counted as civic engagement. A more equitable research framework changes how research is done and written up (Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, & Wang, 2019). Writing together embraces diversity and difference (Larson & Moses, 2018). A more emergent understanding of civic engagement in the lived world

complicates and nuances what civic engagement could be. This then re-frames the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge in new ways to create a new and emergent model of civic engagement and participation within everyday settings.

When young people make statements, like, “I need privacy,” “I need to feel safe,” “I feel stamped on” these statements might remain hidden. To become broadcast, to become, in Ellsworth’s (2005) words, “pedagogical address” requires certain kinds of support. Community/university partnerships are one way to support the co-creation of research to surface this “living knowledge” (Facer & Enright, 2016). In the UK, we have been lucky to have had 10 years of funding from the Research Council-funded, Arts and Humanities Research Council-led, Connected Communities programme, which has asked researchers to research with – not on – communities. All of the projects described in this article were funded through that programme. This kind of work requires systemic long-term funding to be able to construct new and emergent research landscapes.

So, I end with a proposition, a “what if”? I wondered what would happen if small scale communicative practices lying in between the private and the public domains could relationally shift how we think and feel in wider terms. This kind of work has been done within art galleries and within conceptual art practices to highlight feelings and protest in subtle ways. Young people’s momentary meaning making can have the feel of public art, which sides with the mundane and everyday to make a point. It can involve practices that are founded on the complexities of social exchange, which focus on transformational change. It is in these small-scale exchanges that civic participation by young people can grow (Batsleer et al., 2017). Art can help create the fabric of social experience to develop new modes of common experience (Corcoran, 2010). Carving out new orders of experience, as Greene (2000) describes, is a process of becoming de-centered. This can lead to a process of engaged cosmopolitanism and an interest in other people’s experience (Stornaiuolo & Jung, 2017). This involves co-created situated understandings from history and experience, out of which these practices can grow (Kinloch, 2010). Bringing these into the world also involves feeling together and acknowledging the importance of affective pedagogies in civic engagement practices (Hickey-Moody, 2013). These are also relational and situated modes of address, moving inside and outside different worlds and practices (Ellsworth, 2005). Young people’s creations, such as the dance and the lily poem can interrupt what is going on and destabilize it. Part of this involves marshalling the idea of intervention as an effective surprise (Nelson, Hull & Young, 2013). This means recognizing the potential that lies in ordinary things (Stewart, 2007). So, from this can grow transformative pedagogies of civic engagement, that are crafted, felt, made, practiced and then, are able to articulate action. Returning to the ideas of crafting, feeling, building and articulating, these need to be situated within the moment, and within the process of becoming, to become co-felt, co-realised and co-

produced (Ehret, 2018). This might mean thinking and feeling through communicational practices, with and alongside young people.

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